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ABSTRACT

A major assumption in personality theory is that the human mind tends to organize experience into conceptual systems. An individual's overall theory of reality includes both self-theory and world-theory. One of the basic postulates in an individual's self-theory is an overall assessment of self-esteem, which becomes the most important influence on his/her pleasure/pain balance. As a higher order postulate, self-esteem is resistant to change. Direct self-assessment of self-esteem, using self-report techniques, appears to be of considerable value in allowing the acquisition of considerable information relatively easily. A major disadvantage is that people cannot be expected to be in direct contact with their preconscious level of self-esteem and often become defensive. A major task, then, is the development of self-esteem scale items that are uninfluenced by defensiveness. Other approaches to measuring self-esteem that are free of the influence of defensiveness include behavioral measures and ratings by others. Self-esteem, when viewed as a basic construct in an individual's implicit conceptual system of self, is of such fundamental importance in understanding human behavior that it warrants a great deal of creative effort in establishing better ways to measure it. (JAC)

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WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM AND HOW CAN IT BE MEASURED?

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What is Self-esteem and How Can It Be Measured

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(Paper presented at the Symposium, Functioning and Measurement of Self-esteem, APA Convention, August 27, 1982, Washington, D.C.)

Reflect for a moment. Do you have high or low self-esteem, and how do you know it? Could you be wrong about it? Could you have high self-esteem and think you have low self-esteem or vice versa? Can other people judge your self-esteem better than you can, or is self-esteem a private matter that only the individual himself or herself can determine? Moreover, what difference does it make what your level of self-esteem is? How important a concept is self-esteem after all?

For the past ten years I have been developing a theory of personality which accords a central role to self-esteem. I will attempt to answer the above questions by presenting selected aspects of the theory and exploring its implications for the measurement of self-esteem.

Some Basic Assumptions in the Theory of Personality

A major assumption of the theory is that the human mind is so constituted that it tends to organize experience into conceptual systems. Human brains make connections between events, and, having made connections, they connect the connections, and so on, until they have developed an organized system of higher and lower order constructs that is both differentiated and integrated. Whether we like it or not, each of us, because he has a human brain, forms a theory of reality that brings order into what otherwise would be experienced as chaos. We need a theory to make sense of the world, just as a scientist needs a theory to make sense out of the limited body of information he/she wishes to understand.

In addition to making connections between events, human brains have

pain and pleasure centers. The human being thus has an interesting life-time task cut out for him/her simply because of his/her biological structure. It is to construct a conceptual system that will account for reality in such a manner as to produce the most favorable pleasure/pain balance over the anticipated future. This is obviously no simple hedonism, for the pursuit of short term pleasure is often antithetical to long-term happiness.

An individual's overall theory of reality includes subtheories of what the individual is like (a self-theory), of what the world is like (a world theory), and of how the two interact with each other. Like any theory, a personal theory of reality consists of a hierarchical arrangement of major and minor postulates. The lowest level of a postulate is a relatively narrow generalization derived directly from experience. Such lower order postulates are organized into broader postulates, and these, in turn, into yet broader ones. An example of a lower order postulate is, "I am a good ping pong player." An example of a higher order postulate is, "I am a good athlete." A much higher order postulate is, "I am a worthy human being." It is obvious that minor, or lower order, postulates can be invalidated without serious consequences to the self-system, as they encompass relatively little of the system, but that invalidation of a major postulate has serious consequences, as it affects a whole network of other postulates. Fortunately, as major postulates are broad generalizations, they are removed from the immediate test of experience, and are therefore not easily invalidated. Moreover, major postulates exert an important influence on what experiences an individual seeks out and on how he/she interprets the experiences. Thus, major postulates tend to function as self-fulfilling prophecies. On of the most basic postulates in a person's self-theory is the person's overall assessment of self, or self-esteem.

It is important to recognize that an individual's self-theory is not

a theory that a person normally is aware of and can describe. Individuals unwittingly construct theories about themselves as a way of dealing with their world. Whether they like it or not, they form concepts about emotionally significant experiences that then serve to organize and guide their future behavior. An individual's self-theory does not exist for its own sake, but is a conceptual tool for accomplishing the following purposes: (a) to assimilate the data of experience, (b) to maximize the pleasure/pain balance over the foreseeable future, and (c) to maintain self-esteem.

The development of a personal theory of reality will be impared if the construction of the theory does not provide a net gain in the favorableness of the pleasure/pain balance. For a young child the major source of positive and negative emotional experience is the love relationship with the mothering one. Thus, it can be expected that feelings of being loveable, and their later internalization as self-love, which is the basis of self-esteem, are intimately associated with the development and maintenance of a theory of reality, and therefore with reality-contact. Of particular interest, in this regard, are case histories of schiozphrenics in which a close relationship is demonstrated between contact with reality and feelings of love. The following account provides a dramatic example of such a reaction in a young schizophrenic girl who refers to her therapist as "Mama." "I perceived a figure of ice which smiled at me. And this smile, showing her white teeth, frightened me. For I saw the individual features of her face, separated from each other. Perhaps it was this independence of each part that inspired such fear and prevented my recognizing her even though I knew who she was....Then I heard this marvelous voice which, like a talisman, could give me again a moment of reality, a contact with life....Warmed again, encouraged, softly repeating Mama's words, I went home. Once in the street, however, I saw again the pasteboard scenery of unreality" (Sechehaye, 1970, pp. 37-38).

In addition to a lack of perceptual integration, it is noteworthy that there is a loss of depth perception, as revealed in the reference to a "pasteboard scenery of unreality." Depth perception requires inferences to be made from distance and size cues. With the loss of integrative capacity, the ability to make such inferences breaks down, and a fundamental perceptual symptom appears.

A related experience, in which perception of reality varies with warmth in a relationship, is recounted in I Never Promised You a Rose Garden (Green, 1964). "When the sign was given, they moved toward each other appearing as elaborately unconcerned as they could. Deborah smiled very slightly, but then a strange thing happened. Into the flat, gray, blurred and two-dimensional waste of her vision, Carla came three-dimensionally and in color, as whole and real as a mouthful of hot coffee..." (p. 192).

Self-esteem and the Self-system

Once a rudimentary self-theory is formed, self-esteem becomes the most important influence on an individual's pleasure/pain balance. Although the maintenance of self-esteem can be subsumed under the need to maintain a favorable pleasure/pain balance, self-esteem is so important in the functioning of the self-system, that it deserves to be recognized in its own right. The maintenance of self-esteem to the child, and later to the adult, is equivalent in importance to the love of a mother to an infant. Once the child has internalized the parents' evaluative reactions, the child automatically loves and withdraws love from himself/herself in a manner similar to the way the parents once did. It is known that a child who loses a relationship with a loved one may become severly depressed and even lose interest in living (cf. Bowlby, 1973). Correspondingly, a perron who suffers serious blows to self-esteem may become seriously depressed and suicidal. In concentration camps, people who lost their feeling of human dignity were often observed to lose interest

in life, and waste away (Krystal, 1968). Injuries to self-esteem are also recognized to be one of the major precipitating factors in acute schizophrenic disorganization (Grinker & Holzman, 1973; Perry, 1976).

People with high self-esteem, in effect, carry within them a loving parent who is proud of their successes and tolerant of their failures. Such people tend to have an optimistic view about life, and to be able to tolerate external stress without becoming excessively anxious. Although capable of being disappointed and depressed by adverse experiences, people with high self-esteem tend to recover quickly, as do children secure in their mother's love. In contrast, people with low self-esteem carry within them a disapproving parent who is harshly critical of their failures and registers only short-lived pleasure when they succeed. Such people tend to be unduly sensitive to failure and to rejection, to have low tolerance for frustration, to take a long time to recover following disappointment, and to have a pessimistic view of life. The picture is not unlike that of children who are insecure in their parent's love.

As already noted, the overall favorableness of an individual's self-assessment identifies one of the most basic postulates in the person's self-theory. As a higher order postulate, self-esteem is resistant to change. Should it change, it has widespread ramifications thoughout the entire conceptual system. Such resistance to change is illustrated in the manner in which some people, despite unusually high levels of achievement, nevertheless maintain a low opinion of their aiblities. It requires a considerable amount of emotionally significant experience in adulthood to counter the emotionally significant experience in childhood from which self-esteem was derived. A further reason for self-esteem being resistent to change is that, as previously noted, once a postulate is formulated, it tends to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. People with high self-esteem who fail in a task tend to assume that their performance was not represent-

tative of th ir ability, and that they will do better next time. If they do well, they accept it as evidence of their adequacy. For people with low self-esteem, failure confirms their inadequacy. If they do well, they question the validity of the test, or assume they were lucky. Moreover, people with high self-esteem, because they are confident of their abilities, are able to work more efficiently and with less strain than people with low self-esteem, and, as a result, are more apt to actually succeed.

Finally, in order to understand why some people tend to maintain an unrealistically low level of self-esteem, it is necessary to consider the effect of a sudden decrease in self-esteem relative to maintaining a stable low level to begin with. As sudden decreases in self-esteem are particularly aversive, each person is faced with the task of setting his/her general level of self-appraisal as high as possible without setting it so high that the unpleasant feelings produced by decreases in self-esteem outweigh the positive feelings gained by a high resting level. It can be anticipated that the more sensitive an individual is to decreases in self-esteem, the more likely is the individual to set a low general level. To note that some individuals are motivated to maintain low levels of self-esteem is not to suggest that self-esteem can not be raised, but to indicate that, for good motivational reasons, it tends to be resistant to change.

Not only can unrealistically low self appraisal be used as a defense against the pain of failure and disappointment, but unrealistically high appraisal can serve the same purpose. In the latter case, however, the appraisal must be insulated from the test of reality. If a person insists he is Napoleon, it may make him feel important, but it also forces him to dissociate himself from reality in order to maintain the delusion. That such extreme reactions do occur attests to the critical need humans have for positive self-esteem.

Implications for Measurement of Self-esteem

Having identified self-esteem as a preconscious, implicit assessment

of the self, corresponding at its most fundamental level to a feeling of love-worthiness, what are the implications for its measurement? What value can there be, for example, in conscious self-assessments, as in many of the currently available self-report inventories of self-esteem? As indicated by a great number of studies that have produced interesting and coherent results by relating responses on self-report inventories of self-esteem to behavioral and other measure, direct self-assessment of self-esteem appears to be of considerable value. One of the advantages of self-report techniques is that it is possible with their use to acquire a great deal of information relatively easily. Like other aspects of the self-concept, self-esteem is both differentiated and integrated. Thus, it is informative to examine, in addition to global self-esteem, a diagnostic profile of self-esteem with respect to its various components. A particularly informative inventory in this respect is one recently constructed by O'Brien for his doctoral dissertation. The inventory contains scales of global self-esteem, competence, likeability (popularity), loveability (capacity for establishing intimate relationships), moral self-approval (as opposed to guilt), body self-image, power (ability to influence others), will-power, a scale of internal consistency, and a scale of defensiveness. The individual scales have satisfactory levels of reliability, and a beginning has been made in establishing their validity.

The major disadvantage of self-report scales of self-esteem is that people can not be expected to be in direct contact with their preconscious level of self-assessment. As I have discussed elsewhere, (Epstein, in press), the preconscious system operates by different rules of logic and evidence than the conscious system, and may or may not be available to conscious awareness, depending on a person's sensitivity and defensiveness. People can obviously learn to make and believe verbal statements about themselves that have little bearing on their actual behavior or emotional

reactions. It is thus not surprising that in several studies, subjects high on both defensiveness and self-reported self-esteem behaved in ways more characteristic of low than of high self-esteem subjects who were low in defensiveness (e.g., Silber, E., & Tippett, J.S., 1965). In a recent doctoral dissertation, Alexander (1980) administered self-esteem items while monitoring physiological reactivity on a polygraph in the manner of a lie-detection test. He found that subjects who obtained high scores on self-esteem and defensiveness exhibited a greater degree of physiological disturbance when endorsing favorable self-esteem items than subjects with equally high self-esteem scores, but with low scores on defensiveness. This finding is of particular interest because it suggests that so long as the defensive subjects were not consciously lying, which seems doubtful under the circumstances, at some level they must have recognised that their responses were inaccurate, which would indicate that self-esteem is processed at different levels.

Given the influence of defensiveness on self-esteem, the one most pressing problem in the development of self-esteem scales is to devise items that are relatively uninfluenced by defensiveness. Whether this is possible in self-report scales remains to be seem. An approach that warrants consideration is the investigation of correlates of self-esteem that are less transparent than direct assessments of self-worth. It can be expected, on theoretical grounds, that high self-esteem subjects have high frustration tolerance, are resistant to disorganization, can acknowledge weakness and instances of failure, are tolerant of their own and others mistakes, do not make extravagant claims about themselves, are not excessively critical of themselves, are optimistic within reason, and assume that they will generally be liked. In any event, once items based on such considerations are devised it can be determined through standard test-

procedures
construction whether it is possible to form a homogeneous scale that is correlated with standard self-esteem inventories, yet minimally influenced by defensiveness. The construction of such a scale would, of course, help elucidate the concept of self-esteem.

Other approaches to measuring self-esteem in a manner that is free of the influence of defensiveness include the use of behavioral measures and ratings by others. The use of such procedures is illustrated in an interesting series of studies by Savin-Williams and Jaquish (1981) reported in the Journal of Personality. They examined the relationship between self-report measures of self-esteem, ratings by others, and specific behaviors. Ratings of others consisted of peer ratings by individuals who participated in common experiences with the subjects, such as attending a summer camp and being in the same class in school. Behavioral measures consisted of check lists of items that peers judged relevant to self-esttem for the adolescent age group that was studied. Included were items such as maintains eye contact, gives excuses for failures, brags, and is dogmatic in his or her views. It was found that global self-assessment methods, such as the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, were consistent among themselves, but were unrelated to the behavioral measures and the ratings by others, which were consistent among themselves. The authors concluded that their findings suggested that there were serious limitations in the use of self-report measures, which they speculated was a result of defensiveness. As their studies were done with small numbers of cases and without the use of a measure of defensiveness, the need for replication and the inclusion of a measure of defensiveness is apparent. Regardless of the ultimate outcome, the study provides some interesting approaches to the measurement of self-esteem.

If self-esteem is as important as many believe it to be, it should

have widespread behavioral effects that are observable and measureable. Such measures might well serve as criteria against which to validate self-report measures. In addition to behavioral measures and ratings by judges, additional techniques that might be worth exploring are the use of projective tests, such as specially constructed thematic apperception tests (TATs) and word association tests in which subjects could be required to respond with the statement "me" or "not me" to positive and negative stimulus words while their physiological reactivity is monitored with a polygraph, in the manner of the study by Alexander. Specially constructed TAT pictures could be designed for eliciting themes relevant to self-esteem. Possibly a scoring system for thematic self-esteem responses could be devised similar to the system developed by MClelland (1981) and his colleagues for measuring the achievement, affiliation, and power motives. It is noteworthy that the need for power, as defined by McClelland, contains a large element of the need for prestige. It would thus be of interest to examine the relationship of McClelland's n Power score to measures of self-esteem. It would not be surprising if the relationship reported by McClelland between n Power and maladaptive behaviors, such as drinking, gambling, and impulsive aggression are mediated by low self-esteem, as people who exhibit an inordinate desire for prestige in fantasy might be expected to be compensating for feelings of inadequacy.

In conclusion, self-esteem, when viewed as a basic construct in an individual's implicit conceptual system of self, is of such fundamental importance in understanding human behavior that it warrants a great deal of creative effort in establishing better ways to measure it than are currently available.

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